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Re-reading Identities in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper:"

A Reader Response Approach
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Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (TYW)[1] is a short story that since its rediscovery by feminist critics in the 1960's has been continually re-read and consequently subjected to a variety of different readings.[2] Although this short story's intent is explicitly didactical and political (it denounces the role of patriarchy in the oppression and alienation of nineteenth-century women) I shall argue that its political efficacy stems from those places of indeterminacy in the narrative which oblige the reader to participate in the production–as opposed to consumption–of meaning. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to delineate–via Wofgang Iser's theory of "aesthetic response" (*Wirkungstheorie*)–the role of the reader in the process of reconceptualization and reconstitution of women's identity.[3] More specifically, I engage the contradictory textual forces at work in TYW in order to disrupt patriarchal structures of thought which violently divide "masculine" from "feminine" roles, public from private identities and reason from madness. Moreover, by focusing on the dialectical process that takes place between reader and text I will argue that this confrontation is the starting point for restructuring the reader's own thoughts and, ultimately, her/his own self.[4]

According to Iser, "the literary work is a form of communication" (*Act* ix) which stems from the interaction between text and reader. This is particularly true of a short story written in the from of a diary where the first person narrator, who is also the protagonist of the story, directly addresses the reader.[5] Moreover, aesthetic response theory is not so much concerned with the meaning of a text as with its effect on the reader. To put it with Iser, "what is important is what literature *does* and not what it *means*" (ib., 53). Thus, since literature means what it does, it should first be asked what are the effects of the diary form on the reader.

The literary devise of the diary form offers a direct access to the thoughts of the narrator and the subjugated position she occupies within nineteenth-century patriarchal economy. In fact, a short story written in the form of a diary transgresses the

1 In Sandra M. Gilbert, Susan Guber, (eds.), *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women. The Tradition in English.* New York, London: Norton & Company, 1985. 1148-1161.
2 The MLA Bibliography lists forty-four titles of essays dealing with TYW, and King and Morris point out that "the reading history of the story is of a series of conflicting interpretations" (King and Morris, 23).
3 I am here using Iser's own taxonomy which I draw from his book *The Act of Reading. A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, instead of referring to more general terms such as "Reception Theory" or "Reader Response Theory" which include a variety of heterogeneous theorists who also have the reader as major center of interest.
4 I consider this essay as an extension of King and Morris's "On Not Reading Between the Lines: Models of Reading in 'The Yellow Wallpaper.'" Although they also focus their attention on the reading process of TYW, their reading is not explicitly based on Iser's *Wirkungstheorie* and thus does not delineate the phenomenological premises inherent in Iser's approach. I also focus on different underlying textual strategies and their impact on the reader in order to (re)evaluate the radical political dimension inherent in TYW.
5 The narrator/heroine is both subject and respectively object of her discourse.

boundaries between private and public sphere. This movement takes place in both directions depending on the different perspectives of reader and author. In fact, if on the one hand this formal devise is a way for the author to bring personal issues into the public arena,[6] on the other hand, the public medium of the short story provides the reader with a door to enter the author's private sphere. This formal structure has thus the effect of providing a link between author and reader. Moreover, the reading of a private diary involves the reader's participation in a private and personal experience which is instrumental to promote a feeling of complicity between author and reader.[7] Gilman's strategic move has not only direct political and ideological implications, but is also instrumental for the constitution of what Iser calls "an arena in which reader and author participate in a game of imagination" ("Reading Process" 51).

The theme of imagination leads us directly to the narrative's initial lines. Gilman writes: "It is very seldom that mere ordinary people like John and myself secure ancestral halls for the summer./ A colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I would say a haunted house and reach the height of romantic felicity" (1148). Gilman's peculiar choice of vocabulary ("ancestral halls", "colonial mansion", haunted house", "romantic felicity") introduces from the beginning an indeterminacy of meaning that calls for an interpretative act–why does she choose these words and what is the relationship between them?–and thus participation on the side of the reader. In fact, TYW' s opening introduces us to Iser's central concept of "gap" which he defines as a "fundamental asymmetry between text and reader that gives rise to communication in the reading process" (*Act* 167). These textual gaps open up possibilities of meaning–rather than a single meaning–that need to be produced by the reader's hermeneutic skills. In Iser's terminology, the gaps allow the reader to " 'climb abroad' the text" ("Reading Process" 52).

Imagination, indeed, seems a characteristic that both reader and narrator must have in common. The references to the "hunted house" as well as "romantic felicity" point not only to the narrator's imaginative nature, but also suggest that she is familiar with the world of literature (she is a reader herself) and more specifically, with nineteenth-century literary fascination with the Gothic.[8] One question that ensues from these initial lines concerns the relationship between "ordinary people" and the Gothic tales of the extraordinary to which Gilman alludes. These incommensurable worlds (the ordinary and the extra-ordinary) have a common denominator in the theme of domestic oppression. *TWP* is, in fact, a story of a woman driven mad by the patriarchal fetters imposed upon her by her husband.

6 Gilman's short story is highly autobiographical—she herself suffered from "a severe and continuous nervous breakdown" ("Why I Wrote" 657)—and is a response to the widespread "rest cure" popularized in the nineteenth century by dr. Weir Mitchell whom she had consulted and who in 1887 advised her to " 'live as domestic a life as far as possible,' to 'have but two hours of intellectual life a day,' and ' never to touch pen, brush or pencil again as long as [she] lived' " (ib., 657).

7 It should be noted that although the reader is actually aware that what she/he is reading is not a diary, it can still be perceived as such through the willing suspension of disbelief which, according to Coleridge, characterizes the reading of literature.

8 I am thinking in particular of Edgar Allen Poe's fascination with the grotesque, the arabesque, the supernatural and the extraordinary. Gilman's relationship to Poe is implemented by the fact that two of Poe's most famous short stories, "Ligeia" and "The Fall of the House of Usher," explicitly deal with the death of young women in so called "hunted houses" probably by the hand of male characters (there are numerous hints that the narrator of "Ligeia" kills Lady Rowena to bring his beloved Ligeia back to life, and that Rodrick Usher kills his sister). After a second reading of the TYW the reader cannot fail to recognize a common theme between Gilman's and Poe's stories.

As we read along, we soon realize that the narrator's imagination is thwarted by her husband's rationalist worldview. We read: "John is practical in the extreme. ...[H]e scoff openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures" (1148). "John" is a common name for a common patriarchal attitude and as such the narrator's husband (an "everyman" figure) potentially represents forces at work in every husband.[9] Moreover, the fact that he is not only a man but that he occupies the social role of " husband" and "physician" (1148), puts him in a double position of power (power, following Foucault, being strictly connected to knowledge) which he uses to counter the narrator's "imaginative *power* and habit of story-making" (1151; my emphasis). I think it is relevant that the author defines imagination as a form of "power." This suggests that the patriarchal repression of imagination might stem from an underlying anxiety concerning a potentially threatening counter-power; a fear of a feminine, imaginative power which threatens to subvert patriarchal, rigid, linear and geometrical thought–a thought that can only be "put down in figures." The imaginative power of both narrator and reader can be set to work to challenge and subvert patriarchal thought.

Gilman plays with conventional tropes which serve to bridge the gap between women and madness in order to challenge the reader to expose the relativity, fragility and inconsistency of these masculinist associations. The narrator, in fact, admits having a "slight hysterical tendency" (1148) and constantly addresses John in the presence of the moon (see 1149, 1155, 1156). If hysteria ("from Latin *hystericus* literally: of the womb; from the belief that hysteria in women originated in disorders of the womb")[10] roots madness in the female body and nature, the multiplicity of references to the moon point to another cultural association between women and madness embodied in the word "lunatic" ("from late Latin *lunaticus*, crazy, moonstruck, from Latin *luna,* moon")[11] which in turn roots madness in the cosmos or, rather, in Western patriarchal metaphysics.

These two references invite the reader to establish a natural and essential link between womanhood and madness, which seems to counter the author's intention. However, Gilman's choice of language can also be seen as a narrative strategy whose purpose is to expose the reader's own prejudices (i.e. considering the association between women and madness as essential, as suggested by the etymology of the words "hysteria" and "lunatic"). Through the act of reading, the reader who "is engaged in an active process of composition" (*Act* 48), must first and foremost develop a critical awareness of her/his[12] own prejudices in order to subsequently challenge them. This can

9 It should be noticed that if the husband/physician figure has a common name, the narrator, whose relationship to the male figure relegates her to the role of wife/patient, is not named. Merleau-Ponty points out that "the lack of a sign can itself be a sign" (in Act 164), and indeed the lack of a name has the effect of endowing the narrator with a representative dimension concerning nineteenth-century women. If John is "everyman", the heroine of TYW is "everywoman".

10 Quoted in *Collins English Dictionary*, Glasgow: Harper Collins Publishers, 2000, p. 763.

11 It should be added that the moon, in most Indo-European languages, is a feminine noun (German provides us with an exception, *der Mond*) and that in Western mythologies the moon and the woman have been traditionally associated. One of the reasons being the fact that women's menstrual cycle follows the cycle of the moon.

12 I am aware that masculinist prejudices are of course not essentially inherent to maleness since they can be adopted by the oppressed as well. However, for rhetorical purposes I will refer to the third person singular since patriarchal thought is the product of male hegemony. It should also be noticed that a remnant of patriarchal thought is present in Iser's grammatical choices. In fact, Iser's use of the third person singular masculine pronoun betrays a masculinist belief that the "critical" reader is necessarily male.

be done by realizing that his position parallels what is supposed to be the object of his criticism. Gilman's masculinist associations allow the reader "to become aware of his own position" in order to subsequently induce in him the "feeling [of an] irresistible urge to detach himself from [it]" ("Reader" 116). In fact, "to perceive", as Dewey points out, " a beholder must create his own experience" (*Act* 142) and this creation involves a dismantling of the reader's former prejudice in order to perceive the text anew and, thus, lay new foundations for a creation of his textual experience. Gilman's strategic use of language presents the reader with what appears to be an essentialist relationship (i.e. grounded in nature and the cosmos) in order to prompt the reader to develop a critical awareness of his own masculinist believes.

TYW provides the reader with a third cultural reference which has the power to counter and subvert the essentialism inherent in a conception of madness rooted in the female body and guaranteed by a cosmic "order of things." It should be noted that the heroine is often belittled and turned into a childish figure by John's dominating attitude. The narrator writes: "Then he took me in his arms and called me a blessed little goose" (1151). And in another instance, as she complains about her sickness, John burst out: "Blesses her little heart!...She shall be as sick as she pleases!" (1155). By turning her into a child, John deprives the narrator of the possibility to respond to him on an egalitarian basis–she often says, "what is one to do"?–and thus robs her of the power to use language as well. By becoming an infant in the arms of John we could say, following once again the etymology of the word, that she literally becomes speechless ("infant, from Latin *infans*; speechless").[13] Silenced, the narrator is deprived of the power to articulate her imagination too. From an essentialist perspective on the nature of women's madness, the reader is moved to a cultural one in which madness is induced through the oppressive power of patriarchy which silences the woman's voice. By tracing the etymology of culturally loaded concepts, the reader begins to establish a critical genealogy of the narrator's mental illness.

The patriarchal process of silencing of the narrator is mirrored in the formal structure of the text. In fact, the narrative is broken up by a multitude of physical gaps–empty spaces which cause an interruption of the narrative flow. These gaps indicate different diary entries.[14] They introduce a temporal difference between the segments of the text. Moreover, they point to things that are left unsaid; events that are not narrated; or, to use Toni Morrison's expression, unspeakable things unspoken. It is thus relevant that according to Iser, "the focal point of a text is not what is said but what is unsaid" (*Act* 93) since "[w]hat is said only appears to take significance as a reference to what is not said" (ib., 168). And indeed, these blank textual spaces not only represent an *absence*

13 The relationship between women and children is stressed throughout the text. The narrator thinks she is occupying a "nursery…for the windows are barred for little children" (1150). Moreover, the woman the narrator sees is "crawling" behind the wallpaper (1158)—the loss of verticality implying loss of rationality and consequently humanity as well.

14 Different editions of TYW deal with these narrative gaps differently—the text is cut in different places and the divisions, in certain editions, are emphasized by the presence of dots. From the perspective of aesthetic response theory, these differences produce different effects on the reader and thus on the meaning that is produced (see difference between the edition I use and the one reproduced in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* vol. 2, (fourth edition). New York & London: Norton & Company, 1994, pp. 645-657).

of content but also a formal *presence* that indicates the silencing of the narrator's voice and imagination. Further, these narrative gaps could be said to embody women's silence *tout court* and thus constitute an example of a local formal devise whose implications are "thematic" (ib., 192) and general in scope.

The narrator's process of writing is not willingly interrupted but she is forced into silence. She writes: "There comes John and I must put this away–he hates to have me write a word" (1150) and she adds that she is "absolutely forbidden to work" (1149). To extend the meaning of the gaps from the personal to the wider social sphere, we could also say that they point to the missing presence of women literary imagination in the patriarchal literary canon as well as to the cause of it. Through something that is not present, TYW assumes an emblematic value. It is a text that exposes women's oppression and charts the cultural implications that ensue from it.

The process of silencing of the narrator is directly linked in a causal way to the heroine's progressive descent into madness. It is not the narrator's "fancy" or "habit of story making" (1151)–which John cautions her against and literally suppresses–that brings about her madness, but, as critics have pointed out, its repression instead. Not only, "[t]he cure...is worse than the disease", as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out, (Gilbert and Gubar 89) but the cure is *the source* of the disease.[15] This causal relationship is exposed and thus challenged if we consider the central image of the text, that is to say, the yellow wallpaper.

TYW is a text that allows the reader to "elucidate potential meanings" and cannot be reduced to what Iser calls a "single-meaning approach" (*Act* 22); the image of the yellow wallpaper constitutes an important element of "indeterminacy" which, as we have said, "enables the text to communicate with the reader" (ib., 24). In fact, the wallpaper can be looked at from a variety of perspectives, and the reader's imagination (or "fancy") has to complement the one of the narrator–we could also say author, because of the autobiographical nature of the text–in order to "engage in an active process of composition" (ib., 49). But before focusing on the image of the wallpaper we shall first briefly turn to the space inhabited by the heroine/narrator.

The "ancestral halls" which serve as a temporary dwelling for the couple is described with a strong emphasis on confinement: "[T]here are hedges and walls and gates that lock" (1149). To this tropes of spatial confinement elements of torture are added since not only "windows are barred" but "there are rings and things in the walls" (1150) also. However, the narrator defines the room in innocent terms; she assumes it was "a nursery first, and then playroom and gymnasium" (1150). This introduces a conflict between the narrator's surface statement concerning the room, and the language used to describe it (as well as with the dynamic of the plot). Or, to use Iser's

15 I am here in disagreement with G. Johnson's position as he states that the narrator "willingly accepts madness over repression" (Johnson 522). In fact, the heroine's madness is *the product* of patriarchal repression. Madness is not experiences as an action (or a choice) but is rather a re-action. However, we shall see below how the theme of madness can assume an active role in the subversion of patriarchy.

words, an asymmetry is created "between what is said and what is meant" (*Act* 45).[16] This conflict offers the reader the possibility to adopt different perspectives by having his/her viewpoint "wander" between what is said and what is supposedly meant. This strategic textual device induces the reader to assume "a critical attitude towards the reality portrayed, but at the same time," Iser writes, the author "gives him the alternative of adopting one of the views offered him, or of developing one of his own" ("Reader" 118). Implicitly, the process of questioning the text fosters a critical questioning of the reader's own underlying ideological assumptions.

It should be noted that the signifier "yellow wallpaper" points to two different referents. That is to say, the actual wallpaper (the material texture which covers the room) and the literary text. Indeed, there are many points of contact between these two "texts"–I consider the word text in its broadest sense, as something that can be read. First, both texts are subject to interpretation. An interesting parallel can in fact be drawn between the reader reading TYW and the narrator reading the yellow wallpaper. Second, both wallpaper and short story are prone to be "bombarded with projections" (*Act* 167) since both reader and character attempt to "discover the code[s] underlying the text[s]" (ib., 60). Third, both texts are constituted by a "front pattern" and a multiplicity of "back pattern[s]"(1156). The act of reading consists in a movement from the former to the latter with the help of what patriarchy prescribes, that is to say, imagination.[17]

TYW's textual surface does not provide the reader with a direct and univocal access to the underlying forces that sustain the narrative. In fact what the narrator says of the wallpaper, is true of the short story too: it "confuse[s] the eye in following" writes the narrator, it is "pronounced enough constantly to irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves...they destroy themselves in unheard-of contradictions" (1150). If the wallpaper "changes as the light changes" (1156), so does the short story, depending on the reader's "wandering viewpoint" (*Act* 111). We shall now look at these changes of perspective by considering the point of view of the character/narrator, author and reader: a triad which is united in the process of production of the yellow wallpaper/TYW through the reader's imaginative skills.

On one level, the wallpaper serves the narrator as an open text where her feelings of imprisonment are projected and thus given shape and consistency.[18] However, this gradual process of projection of the self behind the bars of the wallpaper–the narrator

16 There are many instances in the text which represent a clash of perspectives between the narrator's explicit statements and her specific language use. Many of them concern her description of John. She says, for example, that John "is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special *direction*" (1149; my emphasis). Or "he loves me very dearly, and *hates* to have me sick" (1154; my emphasis). Love, already in the initial pages, seems to be sustained by an underlying tyranny and hate, which are left up to the reader to uncover.

17 The distinction between "front pattern" and "back pattern" which seem to structure TYW could be read in a psychoanalytic light in terms of manifest and latent content. Regardless of how useful this distinction is, it implies that there is *one* manifest content that must be uncovered. The distinction introduced by aesthetic theory with its insistence on the dialectical relationship between text and reader, concerns the fact that there is not one final meaning to be uncovered, but that the task of the reader is to "elucidate the potential meanings of a text, and not to restrict himself to just one" (*Act 22*; my emphasis).

18 Following Lévi-Strauss we could say that the wallpaper bears similarities to what he defines as sign with "zero symbolic value" (*"valeur symbolique zéro"*): "A sign that is defined by the necessity of a supplementary symbolic content to what the signified already possesses" (*"un signe marquant la nécessité d'un contenu symbolique supplémantaire à celui qui charge déjà le signifié"* (Lévi-Strauss L; my translation)).

writes that "by moonlight it becomes bars!" (1156)–brings about a dissociation of the self in which the interior (her "real" self) merges with the exterior (the content of her projections). Therefore, a progressive deterioration of the protagonist's mental conditions takes place which leads her to identify with the content of her projected self behind the bars of patriarchy; through *mimesis* the heroine comes to embody the " woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern" (1155). TYW is explicitly a story which deals with the capitulation of a woman under the power of madness. However, this reading, as any univocal reading according to Iser, "does not exhaust the intention of the text" (*Prospectives* 14).

It is interesting, that in TYW the narrator operates a semantic change concerning the word "work". If she initially refers to this term to denominate the practice of writing (1149), as her mental health deteriorates, work becomes synonym with the activity of "peel[ing] off...the paper" (1160). However, a connection between these two different practices can be drawn. They are both attempts to liberate women imprisoned behind the bars of patriarchal society.[19] The narrator says: "If only that top pattern could be gotten off from the under one" (1159). The physical practice in which she engages could be seen as a metaphor for the intellectual enterprise which is carried out by both author and reader. What is at stake in both practices of writing and reading is an exposition of an underlying (and thus invisible) patterns of domination and oppression. If the literary work, according to Roland Barthes "represents history and at the same time resists it" (in *Act* 73), we could add that literature resists oppression by the very practice of representing it. Making oppression visible is the first step towards liberation.

The connection between patriarchy and madness is implemented by images of death related to the pattern of the wallpaper–which in turn can be linked to patriarchy. The narrator writes that the curves of the pattern "suddenly commit suicide" (1150) and that "the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down" (1152), only to add later that "the pattern...strangles so; I think that is why it has so many heads" (1158). It should be remembered that the reading process, according to Iser, is not a linear one. In fact, former statements are constantly revisited in the light of what is being subsequently read–what he calls "retrospection" ("Reading Process" 283).[20] The hypothesis of "suicide" is revisited by one of murder, and the victim is progressively anthropomorphized (the "curves" become "heads"). Therefore, the narrator's progressive delusional experience can be read as its very opposite, namely as a movement towards lucidity, depth of vision and critical thought which are put to work in order to denounce oppression. Hence, the theme of madness, besides having a literal reality, also functions as a strategic, literary "means of telling us something about reality " (*Act* 53): it serves

19 It is therefore relevant that the narrator says: "Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one, and she crawls around fast, and the crawling shakes [the pattern] all over" (1158). This ambiguity is meant to exemplify the condition of women in patriarchy. A concern that has already been considered by pointing out the lack of name of the narrator which gives her a representative role.

20 Neither the narrator nor the reader are therefore required to "think straight" (1154). Reading, as well as writing becomes a means of challenging a fundamental assumption of patriarchy as put forward by John, namely the privilege of reason over imagination, or, to put it differently, of linear, geometrical and pragmatic thinking—where only what can be "put down in figures" (1148) is real—over a more fluid , non-linear and literary kind of thinking.

as a tool for social critique which Gilman uses to unmask forms of patriarchal oppression. Moreover, TYW's texture involves the reader in what Paul Ricoeur has called an "hermeneutic of suspicion" which ultimately must be applied not only the literary texts but also the reader's own ideological assumptions.

If TYW introduces a movement from health to madness, the opposite is also true. This short story's ambiguity stems partly from this double movement. By charting the process of loss of mental health it also exposes its causes and thus charts ways of escape from the bars of patriarchal ideology. The paradoxical nature of the text consists in the fact that the process of mental deterioration is expressed through the powerful means of an imaginative language which does not lose in consistency.[21] In fact, the narrator is both subject and object of her discourse. As an object (character) she sinks into madness, whereas as the subject of narration (author) she progressively strives towards freedom and health. The polysemous nature of the text stems from the reader's wandering perspectives between these two different lines of thought and the process of negotiation of meaning that ensues.

In TYW Gilman avoids the totalizing fallacy inherent in the use of a definitive closure which would reduce possibilities of meanings to one single "truth" of the text. In fact, instead of clearing up ambiguities the final paragraph accentuates them. The narrator, at the end of the short story, describes the entrance of John in her room—at the stage where she has completely identified with her projected image of the woman behind the wallpaper, and thus gone insane—as follows: "I kept on creeping just the same, but I looked at him over my shoulder./'I've got out at last,' said I, 'in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!' " (1161). If it is true that the short story ends with the heroine's failure to recover (a "slight hysterical tendency" evolves into a schizophrenic state), it should be added that a subversion of power relationship which contrast with her state also occurs. The narrator is in fact no longer the subject of another's gaze (the "bulbous eyes" in her room) but is herself looking at John, moving thus from a position of object to one of subject.[22]

An additional indeterminacy is introduced by the reference to a character never mentioned before: Janie. Once again, the text does not promote a final meaning but "different ways of fulfillment" (*Act* 37) instead. On the one hand, the name "Jane" could be read as referring to Jennie, "John's sister...a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper [who] hopes for no better profession" (1152). Jennie is both victim, having incorporated the oppressive ideology, and perpetuator of the system by preventing the narrator to

21 That is to say that the short story does not lose its thematic cohesion. Mastery of language is never lost and the narrator is never deprived of her ability to express herself. To put it differently, she never becomes an "infant".
22 Bak's Foucauldian reading of TYW focuses on the panoptic structure of the room which denies the narrator the status of subject. Foucault says that the Panopticon "induce[s] in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (in Bak 41). The ending inverses this power structure and Bak's foucauldian reading allows him to argue for a liberation of the female subject from patriarchal, diffused, power structures. Although I argue a similar point, the specificity of my approach stems from the responsibility I endorse the reader with, in this process of liberation. The interpretative possibilities inherent in TYW are not exhausted by the text itself (as Bak univocal conclusion seems to imply) but are radically dependent on the reader's ideological assumptions. Since the latter are a function of the reader's positionality, the semantic possibilities of the text can never be exhausted and, thus, the task of the critical reader involves a creation of possible meanings inherent in the text as opposed to the a discovery of a presumed essential meaning buried in the depth of the text.

write. However, why refer to her as Jane if throughout the narrative she is called Jennie? This leads us to a second hypothesis. Since the narrator goes through a process of dissociation of identity, identifying with the woman behind the wallpaper (the latter being, as a projection, both same and other) "Jane" could be referring to the narrator herself. Implicit in this interpretation is the failure of the narrator to liberate herself.

The possibility of the narrator's schizophrenic rupture of the self (one of the ending "potential meanings" (*Act* 22)) contrast with the tone of the very final lines where the voice of the narrator affirms itself in all its clarity: "Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time!" (1161). These last sentences introduce a temporal gap. The secure tone of the narrator suggests that she is now writing from a detached and safe position in which freedom and mental health have been achieved. Moreover, implicit in both form and content of these lines is the supremacy of the narrator over her husband; a subversion of cultural categories has taken place. Gilman, in fact, frustrates patriarchal expectations since it is a man and not a woman who faints. This inversion is instrumental to expose the relativity, fragility and arbitrariness of the gender divide as well as to operate a shift from issues of nature and essence to cultural and social ones.

TYW's ending does not provide the reader with a *dénoument* but allows him/her to look at an earlier passage in a new light (retrospection). The narrator describes her attempt to master the meaning of the wallpaper as follows: "You think you have mastered it, but just as you get well under way in following, it turns a back-somersault and there you are. It slaps you in the face, knocks you down, and tramples upon you. It is like a bad dream" (1156). The narrator's inability to master the wallpaper (to reduce it to one single meaning) very much parallels the reader's impossibility to perform the same operation with the text, and indeed for many readers this short story has been the equivalent of a "bad dream".[23] Gilman reports that "a Boston physician made a protest in *The Transcript.* Such a story ought not to be written, he said: it was enough to drive anyone mad to read it" (in "Why I Wrote" 657). Indeed, according to Iser, "the literary text acts as a kind of mirror" since "[t]he manner in which the reader experiences the text will reflect his own disposition" ("Reading Process" 281). Literature is a powerful instrument to gain self-knowledge and to expand the reader self-consciousness, but in order to do this we "must suspend the ideas and attitudes that shape our personality" (ib., 291), which is exactly what readers like the Boston physician failed to do.[24]

The act of reading as understood by Iser is a practice in which the "reader [can] constitute himself by constituting a reality hitherto unfamiliar to himself" (*Act* 151) and this can be done by thinking the thoughts of another (the author's) since "only when the reader has been taken outside his own experience can his viewpoint be changed" (ib.,

23 It should be noted that in this reading of TYW the focus has not been so much on "consistency building", the illusionary attempt to "fit everything together in a consistent pattern" ("Reading Process" 283—although it is impossible to totally avoid this tendency in the production of meaning—but rather on an attempt to "elucidate potential meanings of a text" (Act 22).
24 Political and social transformation has to be rooted on personal transformation first and literature helps in this direction.

151). It is worth noting that since TYW is a short story told in the first person narration there is ample space for the expression of the "I" of the narrator. Georges Poulet points out that by giving voice to this "I" the reader breaks down the fundamental distinction between self and other.[25] If we pursue this stimulating idea we can come to a better understanding of TYW's efficacy in terms of a text concerned with both personal and sociopolitical reform. To put it briefly, reading TYW implies a fundamental transgression of boundaries. For male readers the reading of this text implies a transgression of the gender divide (men are forced to think the thoughts of a woman). Moreover, this narrative crosses the barrier that divides "normality" from "madness" as well. The blurring of these frontiers has the function to take the reader "outside his own experience" into the realm of the "other," and thus promotes "the drawing of new boundaries" ("Reading Process" 293). Hence, the disturbing and challenging effect of TYW: a text that pushes the reader not only to think about madness, but also to *experience* it, through Gilman's critical perspective. An understanding of TYW, therefore, implies a transgression of these barriers in order for the text to gain "significance" as Paul Ricoeur defines it, namely, as the "active taking over of the meaning by the reader–i.e., the meaning taking effect in existence" (in *Act* 151).

Transformation of identity is here understood as the outcome of the creative encounter that takes place between author and reader. In the act of reading–i.e., in the constitution of meaning–there is the potential for the reconfiguration of the boundaries of selfhood, for the exploration of new areas of awareness and, therefore, for the creation of new identities as well. To put it briefly, we could say that the constitution of meaning is the starting point for the constitution of the self. Moreover, if meaning is *produced* rather than *discovered*, the same could be said of identity. Thus, if the narrator of TYW writes her way out of patriarchy–she transgresses given barriers of selfhood–and constitutes a new self through writing, we could also say the same for the reader. By constituting meanings that where originally alien to him/her, the reader is allowed to participate in this transformational process and to rewrite the text of his/her own identity into existence.

25 He makes the point that in reading, "here I am thinking a thought that manifestly belongs to another mental world, which is being thought in me just as though I did not exist....Whenever I read, I mentally pronounce an *I*, and yet the *I* which I pronounce is not myself" ("Reading Process" 292).

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